

Testimony of Shayna Williams, Esq. in Support of S.B. No 427

I am an immigration attorney practicing in Hartford, Connecticut. A significant amount of my practice is dedicated to representing juveniles in Petitions for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status in order to avoid removal in deportation proceedings. The majority of my clients are teenagers between the ages of twelve and seventeen. All of these children were abandoned, abused or neglected by one or both of their parents at a very young age. In many cases they were left to live with relatives in their native country, often moving several times throughout their childhood. Physical, emotional and sexual abuse are commonplace among these children as they are often being cared for by people who have no interest in their mental health and well being. Due to their living conditions these children eventually make the decision to flee. However, I am not talking about an eight-year-old child. I'm talking about a teenager who has endured years of abuse and neglect that is old enough to make the decision to leave, which has the physical and mental capacity to make the journey. Some of these children make the journey alone, some of travel with coyotes and others travel in small groups. But all risk being kidnapped, trafficked or murdered. If and when they arrive to the US, they are apprehended and detained. Eventually they are reunited with friends and family members.

After enduring years of abuse and a treacherous trip to the US these children arrive in our country in an extremely fragile state. They are children. Young children who have not been cared for properly. They are in desperate need of social services, medial attention and more than anything love and protection. They have been suffering from years of abuse, neglect and abandonment and risked their life to come to the US. Once their immediate needs are met their families can begin to answer the question – what now? They do not have a time line in mind. They are simply surviving up to that point. Some of these children arrive to the US at age seventeen and by the time they begin to ask “what now?” – they are already eighteen. To then walk into an attorney's office and hear – you don't qualify for any protection because you are already eighteen - is a major loss for a vulnerable child who has already endured so much. What's worse, is for them to hear that if they lived in New York or Massachusetts they would have been able to qualify.

The federal government has created a law designed to protect children up to the age of twenty-one, because children up to the age of twenty-one need that protection. There are children in Connecticut who are 18, 19 20... and simply due to the fact that they reside in Connecticut they cannot avail themselves of federal immigration protection that would allow them to stay in the US and avoid being returned to a country where they have no one able to care for them...where they would potentially be homeless. It is important to expand the definition of minor child in the state of Connecticut so that the federal statute can serve its purpose and help all children who are vulnerable due to abuse, neglect and abandonment.